People are people: How we re-engage research of natural resource regulation in a changing socio-political landscape in South Africa

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I think all too often we, as scientists, get caught up in the numbers. We forget that our statistics and models actually reflect the workings of real systems in which real people live and work and play. These same real people have to make countless decisions daily, as we do, and their choices are shaped by their own ideas, cultures, temperaments and circumstances. While this may sound blatantly obvious to other socio-ecological researchers, this was an entirely new revelation to me a few months ago. At some point in my research, I just clicked: the people that I had interviewed and studied for two years weren’t just study subjects. They weren’t just elements in a system. They were people, just like me, whose actions were driven by a complex suite of interacting external and internal drivers.

I have always had a passion for natural resource management, specifically in my home country of South Africa. A few years ago, I set out to understand how firewood harvesting was regulated in a rural area of South Africa called Bushbuckridge. Historically, local traditional leaders (chiefs and ndunas) hired patrolmen to police the communal lands and to bring any wrongdoers before the tribal court. If found guilty, the transgressors were then made to paid fines or to complete community service. This simple system was thought to be quite effective at curbing local over-exploitation. Since South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994, though, much anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these systems are no longer in place and that firewood is, in some cases, being over-harvested. With firewood being such an intensely used resource, over-exploitation has massive implications both for the environment and for those that rely on it. As a result, I set out to more definitively investigate these claims of poor regulation in resource-dependent communities.
I worked with six villages that fall within two chieftaincies in Bushbuckridge. Here, through focus groups and interviews with both traditionally- and democratically-elected leaders, I gathered different perspectives and gained an understanding of the current systems of firewood regulation in the region.

![Figure 1. A map of the six study villages in the Bushbuckridge region, South Africa.](image)

What I found was both striking and relevant. Traditional leaders maintain a very high standing in these communities. Despite the establishment of other modern democratic structures, and contrary to my expectations, chiefs are still seen as the ‘ultimate authorities’ and remain fundamental to the regulation of natural resources in the area. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of their systems appears to have dramatically weakened since 1994. For example, no one person could describe the exact details of the permitting system nor could any one group describe the exact laws in place. Many also agreed that ‘nowadays’ ‘everybody harvests, nobody cares’. There was a sense that community members were harvesting firewood with increasing recklessness and that their leaders were increasingly powerless to stop them.

So what does this have to do with the revelation around *people* in our research? The answer lies in why these systems have steadily deteriorated. While budget cuts to traditional leaders were thought to be the only reason for reduced implementation, our research revealed three more critical factors driving this change.

1. **Social tensions between some villagers and their leaders:** Corruption and nepotism as well as leaders’ historical ties to the Apartheid government have, in some villages, bred widespread mistrust between leaders and their constituents. This dissension is not only fuelling a blatant disregard for leaders and their laws by villagers, but it is also compromising the ability of tribal authorities to implement their systems of resource regulation.

2. **Leaders in a catch-22:** Poverty and unemployment were repeatedly described as the two most common drivers of continued firewood use (“Everybody harvests, electricity is expensive”). Here, those unable to afford electricity and who cannot find deadwood often resort to cutting livewood, which is a forbidden activity. Some leaders openly said that they knew people who harvested livewood, but that these harvesters had no other option in such a poverty-stricken and firewood-scarce
environment. Leaders may therefore be consciously choosing to turn a ‘blind eye’ to these instances of illegal harvesting out of empathy and compassion for their constituents.

3. **Political self-interest:** Leaders may also be deliberately ignoring the increase in illegal harvesting because of political expediency. Here, attempts at remaining politically popular with villagers and allowing them free reign over the harvesting of communal resources may be prompting the greater leniency over firewood harvesting rules.

These findings reveal the critical importance of people and their personal motivations in directing behaviours in these resource use systems. These villagers are not just complicit entities whose decisions around firewood collection are simply about accessing energy. Rather their activities are driven by local politics, cultural affiliations, prospects of punishment, financial wellbeing and even, to some extent, personal emotions. They, too, have their own ideas around management, have the potential to resist authority and are seeking to improve their lives. Understanding that these people are people, as you and I, is key to more fully grasping these systems and thereby offering constructive solutions. For example, increasing the budget for traditional leaders to hire patrolmen may not necessarily curb illegal harvesting unless the issues of household poverty are addressed. In the same way, improving the affordability of electricity for poor households (to reduce firewood dependence) fails to tackle perceived corruption and mistrust of leadership. As a result, harvesting livewood as an act of defiance may continue unabated in these villages. As researchers and policy-makers, I would argue that we therefore need to incorporate as diverse perspectives, as and where possible, into our research and thereby begin to ‘rehumanise’ our study subjects. Through this, our research can begin to move beyond the ‘scientific’ space of merely classifying elements in the system and into a realm where we genuinely grapple with and engage communities in the complexity of challenges they face.

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